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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CAIRO 007325

SIPDIS

NSC STAFF FOR POUNDS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/20/2015

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [EG](#)

SUBJECT: EGYPT: OPPOSITION LEADER NOUR WARDS OFF INTERNAL PARTY CHALLENGE BUT MORE CLOUDS LOOM

REF: A. CAIRO 5084

[TB](#). CAIRO 4981

[TC](#). CAIRO 4917

Classified by ECPO Minister Counselor Michael Corbin for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

[¶1.](#) (C) Barely a week after Ayman Nour placed second in the presidential race, with a surprising and impressive 500,000 votes, an internal crisis in his Ghad (Tomorrow) Party raised the prospect that his party might not survive to compete in the November parliamentary elections. An attempted putsch against Nour's leadership was decisively put down on September 19, when the party's higher committee expelled several senior party leaders. Meanwhile, Nour's politicized trial on criminal forgery charges is set to resume on September 25. Nour's political future is clouded by the trial, and there remains the possibility that the GOE could seize on "leadership disputes" within the Ghad as an excuse to suspend its license. End summary.

Nour's Leadership Challenged from Within

[¶2.](#) (C) Many Cairo political observers have argued, convincingly, that Ayman Nour was "the big winner" of the September 7 presidential election. Though he placed a distant second to President Mubarak, his garnering of 500,000 votes, according to official figures -- (Ghad party contacts claim he actually got more) -- he soundly displaced the claim of No'man Gom'a's Wafd Party to leadership of the opposition. Yet just over a week after Nour's strong electoral showing, he was faced with a crisis that threatened to destroy his institutional base.

[¶3.](#) (SBU) Nour's leadership of the Ghad was challenged by senior party official Mursi al-Sheikh, with the support of Nour's deputy party chair Musa Musa and senior party member Ragab Hilal Hemeida. On September 17, Al-Sheikh filed suit against Nour in an administrative court, alleging that Nour's call for an extraordinary general conference of the party on September 23 was in violation of party by-laws.

[¶4.](#) (C) Al-Sheikh added insult to injury by publicly accusing Nour of mismanaging the party. Musa, Nour's deputy, openly sided with Al-Sheikh, alleging that Nour was being manipulated by an inner circle of advisors to act against his own and the party's interests. It remained unclear to observers what grave mistakes Nour was supposedly making, as Musa only cited alleged procedural violations of party by-laws in his charge.

Serious Implications

[¶5.](#) (C) Although on the surface Musa's criticism, and even Al-Sheikh's suit, were superficial procedural squabbles, it was clear that the political implications for Nour and his party were potentially devastating. The dispute provided the GOE's Political Parties Committee (PPC), chaired by Shura Council Speaker (and ruling NDP Secretary-General) Safwat Sherif with a potentially perfect pretext to suspend the Ghad Party's license. Suspending parties riven by internal leadership disputes has long been a standard practice of the PPC. Of 19 legally registered parties, four are currently in suspended status for this reason. However, the court rejected Al-Sheikh's suit on September 19, and there are so far no signs of impending PPC action against the Ghad.

[¶6.](#) (C) Nonetheless, particularly given Nour's strong showing in the September 7 presidential polls, many observers believe elements within the GOE would have every reason to undermine the Ghad Party in order to prevent another embarrassingly strong performance in the parliamentary elections. (Comment: In fact, the Ghad's potential electoral threat to the NDP on the parliamentary front will be modest. Our senior party

contact predicts the Ghad will field no more than 30 candidates for the 444 People's Assembly seats that will be contested. End comment.)

¶ 17. (C) Ghad Party contacts, and a number of independent observers, believe that both Musa Musa and Ragab Hilal Hemeida have for some time been firmly under the control of GOE elements out to get Nour and tame, if not destroy, his party. Musa, who was abroad at the time of Nour's January 29 arrest, could have also been jailed - his signature was next to Nour's on all of the offending documents. It is widely believed that prosecution was waived in return for his "cooperation" with the GOE. Likewise, Ragab Hilal, a charismatic businessman with a checkered financial past, could easily be jailed by the GOE - he is known to face numerous unenforced court judgments.

Rebels Crushed

¶ 18. (C) Nour and his camp dealt decisively with the internal challenge. A September 19 meeting of the Ghad Party's higher council ended with the expulsion of senior party officials Musa, Mursi al-Sheikh, Ragab Hilal Hemeida and businessman Ibrahim Saleh. Musa and his expelled colleagues apparently had few friends on the higher committee; the decisions to expel them were unanimous. Left standing in the senior Ghad Party leadership were Vice Presidents Nagui al-Ghatrifi, a retired diplomat, and Hisham Kassem, a newspaper publisher and outspoken GOE critic, and assistant Secretary-General and Nour confidante Wael Nowara. Egyptian press reports are also citing rumors that Nour's wife Gamila Ismail might be elected to fill one of the newly vacant senior party posts at the September 23 conference.

More Clouds on the Horizon

¶ 19. (C) Meanwhile, Ayman Nour's trial on criminal forgery charges is set to resume on September 25. The venue for the trial has been moved from the high profile South Cairo courthouse to a more obscure courtroom in the eastern Cairo suburb of Nasr City. Nour and his supporters continue to contend that the charges were manufactured against him by political enemies within the GOE and the ruling NDP, expressly to punish his strident criticism of the regime undermine the potential electoral challenges posed by his new party.

¶ 10. (C) Nour's trial opened in late June in a circus-like atmosphere (reflets) with thousands of supporters, many of them unruly, contained by thousands of riot police. As reported in ref B, the prosecution was thrown into apparent disarray when its star witness asserted to judges and courtroom observers that he had been coerced into testifying against Nour. Even so, few Cairo political observers are willing to predict which direction the trial will take, although most assume that any major decisions taken by the court will be political - and dictated by the GOE.

Comment

¶ 11. (C) There are three principal scenarios for Nour's trial. First, it could end in a quick acquittal, presumably vindicating Nour and allowing him and his party to focus on the legislative elections. Second, it could end in a fairly rapid conviction, removing Nour from the stage and probably wrecking the Ghad Party, but with uncertain and possibly explosive political repercussions. Third, and probably most likely, the trial could drag on, either through lengthy hearings or further postponements, until after the parliamentary elections. This scenario would have the effect of undermining Nour and the Ghad without risking the backlash of a conviction.

¶ 12. (C) We also cannot discount the possibility that the PPC might recognize the expelled Ghad figures as a rival, parallel leadership, should they present themselves as such, and thus decide to suspend the party's license. End comment.

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JONES